

January 12, 2001, ABC News 20-20 will aired a segment on mercury in store-bought fish. It included an interview with Senator Leahy (D, Vermont) who has criticized FDA for not issuing a warning to limit consumption of canned tuna by pregnant women (or those who may become pregnant within a year) and children under 6 years old, and a warning for those same groups to stop eating swordfish and shark altogether

Also below, an article from a Connecticut newspaper on mercury in store-bought seafood.

Pregnant Women Warned On Diet

By DANIEL P. JONES

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First it was cigarette smoke, then alcoholic drinks. Now add tuna sandwiches to the list of things pregnant women should limit or avoid to protect the unborn.

Tuna, both canned and fresh, and two other kinds of fish - swordfish and shark - may contain enough toxic mercury to cause developmental and learning disabilities in young children if it's eaten regularly and in larger quantities, some of the nation's leading scientists say. Based on that information - and lacking such a warning from the federal Food and Drug Administration - Connecticut health authorities are advising pregnant women to limit meals of canned tuna and to avoid swordfish and shark altogether.

State health authorities have long advised people to limit consumption of freshwater fish they catch in the state because of mercury contamination. But store-bought seafood was not included in the warning.

Now the state Department of Public Health is recommending that pregnant women, women planning to get pregnant within a year and children younger than 6 should not have more than one or two meals of canned tuna a week. They should also limit meals of fresh or frozen tuna to one a month, and should eat no swordfish or shark because of the increased risk of mercury-related harm. The agency also suggests choosing light tuna instead of white or chunk white because mercury levels are lower.

Suggested Nutritional Guidelines For Pregnant Women

"If you eat too much of these fish, your unborn baby or young child might be affected," the state health department release states. Other seafood sold in stores, such as cod, flounder, salmon and pollock, can be eaten "as often as you want," the advisory says. The FDA, which currently does not warn pregnant women to limit consumption of canned tuna, had been expected

to decide by late last year whether to revise its consumer advisories on mercury in seafood. A revision was expected after a National Academy of Sciences report last July concluded that the risks from mercury levels in the environment pose an unacceptable health risk to children born to mothers who eat such fish during pregnancy. The academy's panel of scientists estimated that 60,000 children born each year in the United States were exposed during pregnancy to mercury levels that could cause neurological and learning problems.

The academy study confirmed that the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's exposure standard - the safe limit for the amount of mercury in a person's body - was scientifically valid. That standard, 0.1 microgram of mercury per kilogram of body weight per day, is about five times more stringent than the FDA's limit for mercury in fish, which is 1 part per million. The mercury comes mainly from the burning of coal in power plants. It falls into lakes, rivers and oceans and is converted to methylmercury, the most harmful to people. After entering the food chain, the mercury accumulates at increasingly higher levels as larger animals eat smaller ones. Dr. Robert A. Goyer, a pathologist who was chairman of the National Academy of Sciences committee that studied the matter, said the health risks to pregnant women and young children call for a clear warning from the FDA. "All FDA has to do is say [to pregnant women and children younger than 6], 'Don't eat those fish,'" Goyer said. He said FDA officials have contended that consumers wouldn't understand such a recommendation and that the general population might avoid eating all types of fish.

"Women understand not drinking alcohol during pregnancy," Goyer said. "So why couldn't they understand that they're not supposed to eat that sort of fish" during pregnancy? Officials at the FDA referred inquiries to Ruth Welch, a spokeswoman in the agency's press office. She declined to comment. Connecticut is one of six states that have issued their own seafood-consumption advisories about mercury in tuna, swordfish and shark, without waiting for the FDA's decision.

The fishing industry opposes the states' advisories on tuna consumption, saying they are overly restrictive and unnecessary. "Average mercury levels [in canned tuna] are very low because they're processed from smaller species of tuna," said Linda Candler, a spokeswoman for the National Fisheries Institute, the trade group of the fish and seafood industry. Larger tuna tend to accumulate higher levels of mercury. Both the FDA and the fisheries institute advise pregnant and breast-feeding women to limit consumption of swordfish, shark and fresh tuna to once a month. "Mercury content in such popular species as canned tuna, cod, pollock, salmon, flounder, trout, farm-raised catfish, shrimp and all other shellfish does not approach the [FDA's] action level and is often measured at levels

10 times lower," the fisheries institute says.

The FDA has come under pressure from the fishing industry and members of Congress, including U.S. Sen. Christopher Dodd, D-Conn., and nine other senators, to hold off any decision until after reviewing more scientific information. That data is expected from a University of Rochester study of children born to mothers who had elevated mercury levels in their bodies. Initial phases of the study have shown no problems among the children, and the next phase, expected within a month, probably will show the same, Candler and other observers say.

Environmental and food-safety advocacy groups, meanwhile, have accused the FDA of dragging its feet on the issue. At least two U.S. senators, Democrats Patrick Leahy of Vermont and Tom Harkin of Iowa, also have criticized the FDA for its delay, and because the agency does not test fish destined for public consumption for mercury contamination. The critics of the FDA's indecision say that the National Academy of Sciences report should have put to rest any debate over whether tighter restrictions on mercury in seafood are warranted.

"The national academy is the last word in assessment of scientific research," said David Carle, an aide to Sen. Leahy who has worked on the issue.